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County Strike Team to Help Protect Public from Toxic Threats

Citing the dangers of arsenic, lead and other toxic exposures to Los Angeles County residents, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted to create a Toxic Threat Strike Team to monitor and coordinate inspections around environmental toxic sites around the county.

The Strike Team, presented in a motion authored by Supervisor Gloria Molina and amended by Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, would intervene and coordinate with state regulators to make sure communities concerns are addressed.

“This is a fundamental quality of life issue,” said Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas. “A dedicated investment may be required so that the county is consistently and proactively helping communities improve the quality of the air they breathe and the water they drink. The environmental and public health impacts of these types of industrial uses may vary, but it is oftentimes challenging for surrounding residents to accurately assess the facility’s impacts, given the high level of technicality involved in the review and analysis.”

The Strike Team proposal comes as elevated levels of lead have been found in the soil of homes and a preschool near the Exide Technologies battery recycling plant in Vernon, prompting officials to issue health warnings and order more testing in adjacent neighborhoods.

“I will actually go out on a limb and call it environmental racism,” said Patty Bilgin of the Los Angeles County City Attorney’s Environmental Justice unit. “The quality of air you breathe and water you drink should not be dictated by the color of your skin....I believe in a coordinated collaborative approach that will combine enforcement, a revisit of land use zoning law, community outreach and the political will.”

A legacy of poor land use planning has led to a variety of industrial uses, ranging from urban oil fields in North University Park to scrap metal recyclers along the Alameda Corridor, operating in very close proximity to residential communities. The Countywide Strike Team could play a proactive role by supporting community outreach and education, and working with local community leaders to determine whether there are public health impacts or nuisances that need to be addressed. The Strike Team will also play a proactive role in developing mitigation strategies for the most highly burdened communities.

“We would much rather have earlier county involvement in state regulatory decisions,” said Jonathan Fielding, head of the Los Angeles Department of Public Health. “The state has the overall responsibility for most of these. But we have been called in generally in the late stages when there is issue of how to communicate risk to the public. So we want to get involved in the early stages.”

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